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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to think of any subject more conspicuous by its absence from the college classroom than the discussion of racial issues. Factors contributing to this absence include uncertainty about how to raise and discuss such issues and fear of appearing to be racist. In order to break higher education's silence on racial issues, faculty should: (1) communicate their uncertainty to students and invite them to convey theirs; (2) acknowledge their ambivalence about raising provocative issues; (3) listen without judging; (4) allow time for students to compose their thoughts; (5) invite students to evaluate the underlying assumptions in their statements; (6) maintain the examination of differing viewpoints as a top priority; (7) reduce the fear whites have of being seen as racists; (8) acknowledge the legitimacy of anger; (9) examine the belief that only blacks are hurt by racism; and (10) help students recognize the unique strengths that blacks have developed. (DC)

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DISCUSSING RACIAL TOPICS IN CLASS

by John F. Noonan

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DISCUSSING RACIAL TOPICS IN CLASS

If visitors to this country tried to gauge the gravity of problems in American society by their prominence in class discussions, they would conclude that racism is not a major problem. It is difficult to think of any subject more conspicuous by its absence from the college classroom. My colleagues and I have been working on a FIPSE-funded project called "White Teachers and Black Students: Exploring Assumptions and Practices." One of our aims is to help faculty encourage frank exploration of racial topics to help students function more effectively in this multi-racial society.

Why is the silence so prevasive? Aside from the tendency in the broader society to ignore racial issues by imagining them settled two decades ago, or to characterize them as unnecessarily divisive topics whose airing "makes matters worse," the silence is deepened by other causes. Faculty may be uncertain how to raise racial topics or how to conduct discussions of them. Both faculty and students may be afraid that their remarks or their silence will be construed as racist in nature. There are, however, a number of ways to break higher education's long silence on racial issues.

First, communicate your uncertainty to students and invite them to convey theirs. Teachers who show by example that a person can voice a tentative position in the face of uncertainty thereby offer their students an important lesson about modern living: many contemporary problems are so daunting that insisting on certainty before speaking guarantees silence. Some faculty may be reluctant to articulate their doubts because they presume it is unprofessional to do so, but the image of the completely self-assured professional seems archaic in a society filled with competing viewpoints. An instructor can say something like this: "If at times I look as if I don't know what to say next, it's probably because I don't. Please help me out." Or he or she might say: "I want to hear your thinking on this topic, and the doubts that accompany it. So when you speak, tell us your misgivings. We are seeking truth, not certainty."

Second, acknowledge you ambivalence about raising provocative issues. As one instructor who has been a participant in the project from the beginning said: "I'm tempted not to focus on racial issues because they upset people and leave them with nothing to fall back on." Discussions about race expose students' viewpoints to scrutiny by others. If students have formed strong opinions on racial matters on the basis of little data or deliberation, discussions of the type advocated here may reveal the inadequacy of those opinions and hence cause students to become disoriented. When instructors voice ambivalence, they acknowledge the legitimacy of that powerful emotion, and make it possible for students to acknowledge theirs. Left unacknowledged, the conflict between not wanting to upset others and wanting to pursue truth can silence students and faculty.

Third, listen without judging. Trust that the discussion itself will lead to wider understanding. Unlike some black students who come to college keenly aware of the impacts of racial differences in this society, some white students come with the blinders of narrow experience. A judgmental response by the instructor, whether positive or negative, may motivate students to seek the instructor's approval by making statements calculated to win praise or avoid criticism. A more facilitative response is the question, "In what sense do you mean that?" The more popular "Why did you say that?" is more apt to cause defensiveness.

Fourth, create zones of silence where students can compose their thoughts. Racism is such a troubling subject that it deserves to be thought about before being

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spoken about, unless you want to hear only from bolder students whose thoughts are already formulated. Faculty can say: "I'd like you to reflect on the topic for a few minutes before you speak." They can also say: "After a person has spoken, I hope no one will speak for a few seconds so the words have a chance to sink in."

Fifth, invite students to evaluate underlying assumptions in their statements. Here are three examples we have heard many times in the last two years:

Statements	Assumptions
"Other minorities have problems too."	"Because other groups suffer, we should not dwell on any one in particular."
"Let's look at the progress blacks have made."	"Emphasizing the positive is more beneficial than emphasizing problems."
"I didn't cause the problem."	"So I am not obligated to help solve it."

Without consistent emphasis on assumptions, discussions about race quickly become stalemated. In mainly white classes, this may occur through widespread denial of the problem; in mixed race classes, through statements like "You see it one way; I see it another." The instructor has to work hard in the beginning to avoid these two traps. Assumptions can be important catalysts for intensifying discussion.

Sixth, maintain as top priority the examination of differing viewpoints. Doing this means not turning the discussion into a struggle between good and evil, though students may be tempted to do so, because the flatness of such a contest distorts the issues. If a student claims that blacks are "more loving than whites," the instructor could ask, "In what sense do you mean that?" The instructor can also invite other students to explore the position. Taking all statements seriously enough to examine them is a good way to teach students to take responsibility for what they say.

Seven, reduce the fear whites have of being seen as racists by saying something like, "At issue is not whether a person is a racist. We want to discover the ways racism affects all of us. I assume we have all been affected in various ways."

Eight, acknowledge the legitimacy of anger: "Anger is a sign that a cherished value is being threatened. To be angry in such circumstances is to be committed." Or, "Racism is an upsetting subject. It is appropriate to be upset by it."

Nine, examine the belief that only blacks are hurt by racism. Whites too are hurt, although less dramatically, when, for example, their only exposure to blacks is through the distorted messages broadcast through the media. Black unemployment, to select a second example, carries costs that are borne by all citizens.

Ten, help students recognize the unique strengths blacks have developed in America by correcting the tendency to equate "black" with "problems." To focus only on classroom strengths, our work reinforces the findings of Cowan, Saufley, and Blake that "new students" bring "determination, perseverance, and a resiliency born of a lifetime of having to bounce back to cope with a generally hostile social system." Moreover, many black students bring an awareness of the contradictions in the American economic and political systems: instructors who tap this resource enable <u>all</u> students to learn.

Instructors who want to facilitate discussion of racial topics must work to create an atmosphere supportive enough for students to speak and listen, yet challenging enough to enable them to discover the hidden assumptions and consequences of their thoughts. Students (and faculty too) may resist such discussions because they threaten their world view. The assumption has been that maintaining silence is the best way to face the subject. Faculty must break that silence before it deafens us.

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